

# Correspondence

*The Editors will be pleased to receive and consider for publication correspondence containing information of interest to physicians or commenting on issues of the day. Letters ordinarily should not exceed 600 words and must be typewritten, double-spaced, and submitted in duplicate (the original typescript and one copy). Authors will be given the opportunity to review the editing of their correspondence before publication.*

## Redwood Medicare Assignment Program

TO THE EDITOR: Humboldt County, in northwest California, has developed a successful Medicare assignment program as a completely voluntary cooperative venture among the Humboldt-Del Norte County Medical Society, the Area I Agency on Aging, and the Humboldt Senior Resource Center. This cooperative effort is the key to the program's achievements. The California Medical Association and the California Department of Aging have both endorsed the program.

The goal of the Redwood Medicare Assignment Program is to help Medicare recipients older than 65 obtain affordable medical care. Its principles are

- Voluntary physician participation after careful explanation. Physician involvement rose from 10% before the program's inception to approximately 70% after the first year. It seems to be leveling off at this point.

- Development of income criteria that would not have a "welfare" stigma. The income limits are \$25,000 a year for one person and \$30,000 for a couple. No income verification is requested.

- Simplicity of the application procedure and ease of establishing eligibility at a physician's office.

After approximately 18 months of operation, only one area of the program remains unsuccessful. About 8,000 Medicare recipients are estimated to qualify. Despite several intense educational campaigns, fewer than 2,000 have actually applied.

For a more detailed description of the program, please write to the Humboldt County Medical Society, PO Box 6457, Eureka, CA 95501.

HERBERT NOTKIN, MD  
2612 Hewitt Rd  
Arcata, CA 95521

## Cancer Patients and Support Groups

TO THE EDITOR: We report the results of a recent survey of 292 persons with cancer who were participants in a two-hour-a-week psychosocial support group for an average of 14.5 months at The Wellness Community (TWC). The survey was designed to determine whether people with cancer who participate in support groups abandon conventional medical care. The Wellness Community is a free, nonresi-

dential program, which since opening in Santa Monica in 1982 has provided psychosocial support to over 10,000 persons with cancer.

Our survey was carried out because, despite recent research indicating that psychosocial interventions may have a part to play in the fight against cancer,<sup>1</sup> many physicians still hesitate to endorse such groups, concerned that participation will entice cancer patients to leave traditional medical care.

Over a two-week period during February 1990, a questionnaire was completed by 292 cancer patients, with the following results: Virtually all (287) sought the care of a conventional physician at diagnosis (5 did not answer this question). A total of 274 (93.8%) had been continuously under such care since diagnosis (11 did not answer the question), while 7 left their physicians, 3 because they were in "complete remission," 2 because of personal problems with their physicians, and 1 who had entered alternative treatment.

Thus, most of the 292 respondents had remained under the care of a conventional physician since the time of diagnosis. After approximately 14 months of participation at TWC, only 1 had left conventional care for alternative treatment. We think these findings go beyond the anecdotal in supporting the notion that participation in psychosocial support groups does not impinge upon the use of mainstream medical care.

Our results are, of course, not conclusive, since the cancer patients surveyed were self-selected participants from a single program serving a relatively well-educated, older clientele in one part of the country. Still, they are a start toward a more systematic examination of this question.

HAROLD H. BENJAMIN, PhD  
Founder and President  
The Wellness Community  
2190 Colorado Ave  
Santa Monica, CA 90404

MICHAEL S. GOLDSTEIN, PhD  
Department of Community Health Sciences  
School of Public Health  
University of California, Los Angeles  
10833 Le Conte Ave  
Los Angeles, CA 90024-1772

## REFERENCE

1. Spiegel D, Bloom J, Kraemer HC, Gottheil E: Effect of psychosocial treatment on survival of patients with metastatic breast cancer. *Lancet* 1989; 2:888-891